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## **THE IMPORTANCE OF RELIGION AND THE SECULAR FOR PEACE AND WAR: Challenges For Scholars Seen In The Light Of The Edict Of Milan**

### **Abstract**

*Religion has come to be seen as one of the most common and powerful drivers of armed conflict. This article departs from a prominent portion of the existing academic literature in suggesting that the extensive influence of religion in conflicts cannot be seen primarily as an isolated radicalising ideological force which works by defining the extremity of the crisis at hand. Rather, it is argued, religion exercises much of its influence through practices which express the norms of institutions and communities experiencing conflict. It is for this reason, the essay concludes, that to some religious institutions can appear to define communal aspirations in a conflict, while to others there seems to be no necessary link between that conflict and the use of religious forms or the roles taken by religious actors.*

**Key words:** *religion and war, secular and religious responses in armed conflict, Christianity and the State, evidence in the study of religion/non-religion.*

The Edict of Milan of February 313 remains a potent symbol wherever contemporary states seek to identify themselves as civilized by virtue of their respect for the freedom of religious minorities. The events surrounding the Edict of Milan continue to have an impact across the Christian world for another, potentially more troubling reason. One year before the Edict, Constantine claimed the imperial title after a vision revealed to him that the Empire's army must be led under a standard bearing the letters *chi rho*, the first two letters in *Χριστός*, Christ. Constantine subsequently won the Battle of the Milvian Bridge at the end of October 312, and this victory set the stage for the Edict of Milan, an edict designed to consolidate Constantine's rule to the detriment of his rivals. In much popular Christian culture, this historical context is wholly

overshadowed by the most easily identified long-term consequence of this battle, the identification between Christianity and the military victories of the State.

It is worth paying careful attention to the means by which the *chi rho* emblem has been translated into a basic feature of Christian and post-Christian national cultures around the world today. Through the medium of a Latin translation. Constantine's use of the sign of Christ is widely known to Christians across the world through later embellishments using the anagram IHS, standing both for 'Jesus Christ the Saviour' and equally for the phrase 'In this sign'. Both military and political uses of the symbol commonly render it, relying on the Latin translation, as 'In this sign conquer', rather than the less imperative alternative translation, 'In this sign you will conquer'. The first version, 'In this sign conquer', is more open to interpretation as an injunction to make war in the name of religion, though it need not be interpreted in this fashion. The second version suggests the spiritual power of Christianity as much as the will to conquest. However, it is the first version which is used in political institutions around the Western world, in spite of the shift from what was once a specifically Christian political culture to an increasing emphasis on a politics which is secular or multifaith. Thus, in the British army to this day, chaplains of all religious denominations wear a badge bearing the symbol of the Cross of Christ and Constantine's motto, 'In This Sign Conquer'.

It need therefore not surprise that the proximity of the Battle of Milvian Bridge and the Edict of Milan still resonates in contemporary reflection on the relationship between religion and conflict, and similarly in discourse about the relationship between 'Religion' and 'State'. The academic literature on religion and violence encompasses a range of works which proceed from the assertion that the use of religion is natural in the State's violence, and particularly in wartime. This perspective is advanced by a range of writers, and is not necessarily associated with a common school of thought or political perspective. Religion is construed in this literature as both motivating and justifying violence, and religion is therefore as being implicated in it. Against this tendency, an alternative perspective divorces political abuses of religion from the true nature of religion, insisting that a religion need not be implicated in the political use of its symbols or argumentative tools. Again, there may be a range of reasons for which this perspective appeals, and there is no single school or ideology which dominates argument of this type. The present essay explores the grounds on which such broad intuitions about the relationship between religion and conflict can be examined in the light of hard evidence, empirically. We will make the case for understanding the two alternative approaches to apply more or less persuasively as a result of a decision about the nature of the violence imposed by a conflict: in the first case, conflict being perceived as a crisis changing the relationship between religious and secular meanings, and in the second case the relationship bet-

ween religion and the political realm being part of a complicated normality, not broken by the consequences of a given violent conflict.

Today, a growing body of academic works has sought to cast light on the persistence of religion in conflict (for two influential examples, see Johnston 1994 and Appleby 1999). There is still, nevertheless, much work to be done by academics in this field. There are, for instance, many features of contemporary military life which reflect a religious history about which little research has been published: the ‘baptism’ of officers, marked in secular France and Muslim Morocco with the adoption of a ‘godfather’ by each graduating class; the rituals associated with preparation for combat; the ‘baptism of fire’, the first contact with the enemy; the ‘mission’; the treatment of the dead, of prisoners, of allies through formal pacts; and of victories and of triumph. Secular uses of religion are part of military normality, and it would take a serious effort to understand the extent to which once religious practices such as these continue to operate as religious in the new contexts in which they continue to be used.

Civilians also inherit a plethora of religious institutions associated with war – places and conditions for asylum, the rituals associated with peace negotiations, and invocations associated with forgiveness and with an end to conflict. Civilian populations in many conflicts today mark deaths in wartime as sacred, often borrowing from secularized language about the nation state used by modern European philosophers such as Hegel. There is a long history behind this, such that it may be difficult to untangle why this language seems self-evident to the families of the fallen in Maoist Nepal, or in Leftist kibbutzim steeped in a non-theistic culture in Israel. Critics will view this as a common form of manipulation of the population by a State or armed group, whose survival may depend on persuading people that they may have to die in the defence of their political cause. And yet in both of these two cases governments and armies have found otherwise secular civilian populations insisting upon the sacred quality of the fallen, and on appropriate public funeral or memorial services, where political leaders though to deem this inappropriate or inconvenient. The *mélange* of secular and religious is often more deeply entwined than will allow for simple manipulation. Neither politicians nor religious officials need to create a link for secular publics which already talk of the testimony or witness of the fallen, of citizens who have made the ultimate sacrifice, and whose deaths are justified in speeches about the values for which wars are fought: perhaps the highest human values, or values we hold sacred.

The result is that, whether we are Serbian or French, Nepalese or Burmese, Israeli or Palestinian, our experience of war is a complex combination of secular and religious, of profane and sacred. To study the complexities of this mixture of the secular and religion demands an expensive interdisciplinary collaboration, given that it entails both a careful examination of context and a sophisticated approach to normative fields which link divergent ideologies and social discourses, as we shall see further below.

The challenges of work which bridges careful contextual history or sociological analysis with nuanced reflection on the normative dimensions of the use of religion in conflict can be illustrated through returning to the Edict of Milan. The intellectual resonance of the Edict in contemporary public and scholarly debate is as much about broad intimations about the ideals we inherit from Constantine's time as it is about careful contextual scholarship. The ideals of religious freedom and toleration lie close to the heart of our post-Constantinian civilization, indeed, this is part of our inheritance from the Greeks and Romans. War is treated as legitimate when fought in the name of our freedoms, and, following Constantine's model, in making peace statesmen have given legal substance to the freedoms of minorities, religious and otherwise ever since that time, classically during the Wars of Religion of the fifteenth-seventeenth centuries. To contest the link between freedom and the rights granted by state actions is to revisit one of the basic norms associated with the long development of Western civilization. Critics of this political tradition have lamented the apparent unification of religion and state under Constantine since the Wars of Religion, particularly because it involved a union of Christianity and military power. In the Anglo-American world, the anti-Statist critique that was once identified with radical Anabaptists and other historic peace churches has become popular amongst liberal Protestants of other denominations. Thanks in particular to the influential work of the Mennonite scholar John Howard Yoder (see, e.g. Yoder 1996, 65), 'the Constantinian shift', the joining of Church and State, has been increasingly commonly construed as the basic civilizational flaw which leads traditional Christians into support for state violence. The call for a post-Constantinian revolution is also made in some liberal Jewish circles, borrowing the argument made by liberal Christians such as James Carroll that it was the political, imperial Church which created the conditions for two millennia of anti-Jewish teaching and discrimination in Europe, tolerating small Jewish minorities while also teaching contempt, enmity or hatred for them (Carroll 2001). In these circles, Constantinian Christianity is not seen as a benevolent guarantor of religious freedom for all, but as the militant Church forged by Constantine before the Battle of Milvia in 312, tolerating official Christianity but hostile to independent Christianities and to Judaism.

This historical background is part and parcel of the field into which more careful empirical scholarship about the relationship between religion and conflict, or between religion and peace, is demanded. There may therefore be enormous gains to be made from questioning the terms in which such sweeping generalisations about the marriage of state and church are made. The terrain is difficult to generalize about in part because of the types of evidence most readily available, in part because the importance of that evidence as a guide to understanding how religion motivates conflict or peace-making activities is open to multiple interpretations. Thus, while there are scholars for whom events of 312 and 313 established a basis for intolerant power, other scholars have instead

identified the determining factor in the growth of restrictions on Jewish communities, for instance, in the long contest within imperial structures in the centuries that followed over the appropriate degree of tolerance for religious diversity. In spite of legal restrictions on the building of synagogues, for instance, synagogues were built. Thus, while public sources proclaim restrictions on Jews and on minority Christian groups, the archeological record shows that in many locations these restrictions were often only partly or gradually enforced in practice over the 150 or 200 years to come (see, e.g., Gray, 1993, 262-63). Here is a divergence found many times in empirical work on religion and conflict, and the value of a careful empirical study can easily be seen in this case: The situation became increasingly insecure for these minorities, but the persecutions they came to experience were not solely the product of Constantine's decision to create a Christian empire, they also relied on social and political developments over the centuries to come. In this archetypal case for the study of the impact of religion and conflict on the Western state, a careful scholarship is appropriate, even necessary, given that the published record does not tell the whole story: it is not possible to fully comprehend the relationship between religion and public life through the documents of the imperial institutions.

Scholars seeking to understand the role of religion in conflict today face a parallel situation. Media accounts in many contemporary conflicts make clear how political extremists have made capital out of inter-religious difference, and the public proximity of religious officials to political power provides a context in which it is natural to assume that religion is a key driver for conflict. More careful study would be needed in order to ascertain the attitude of religious figures and of the communities they work in, and there is surprisingly little academic literature at present which tackles this with any deliberate methodological rigour. Thus, at present, much literature infers the attitude of religious functionaries or leaders by their silences, by what they did not do, or by the interpretation we give to their conformity. If this falls foul of a general argumentative trap, attempting to argue from silence, this also presents challenges peculiar to the study of religions and of other group cultures, which the academic literature focused on problems in the study of religion describes in terms of 'insider' and 'outsider' perspectives. Some of the most controversial phenomenon cited in favour of the case for the implication of religion in state violence – in the case of the conflicts of the 1990s in the Former Yugoslav, for instance, the literature highlights controversies associated with the blessing of troops, the construction of religious symbols, and of religious buildings (e.g. Perica 2004, Sells 1996) – cannot be evaluated with any sensitivity without understanding the factors which lead to different 'insider' and 'outsider' understandings.

Nevertheless, from an outsider perspective, insofar as these acts relate to a political conflict, they can communicate that conflict, some will say that the religious-political connection is sufficient to communicate that conflict. Even given the right of insiders to guard their own traditions by right, as soon as reli-

gions are associated with conflict, the establishment of rights or freedoms for one religious community may imply political obstacles for other religions. This provides three levels to any study of a conflict involving religious elements: the understandings of outsiders, those of insiders, and those relationships between insiders and outsiders which contribute to conflict. In some conflicts, as with the competing perspectives amongst Poles and Jews over commemorative symbols at Auschwitz (Zubrzycki 2006), this complexity is understood better. The scholarship on the controversies over religion and memorial practices at Auschwitz shows what advantages derive from building scholarly networks crossing communities, committed to understanding and communicating diverse perspectives without giving up on more careful critical reflection on the factors in the genesis of those perspectives. Since a confusion between religious normality and political conflict may make for an even more dangerous mix, more academic sophistication is not the same as naïve or uncritical positivism.

With respect to other conflicts, by contrast, a stronger body of literature treats the use of religious symbols in public spaces with ethnically mixed populations as deliberate and inevitable political provocation. This is true of much of the best literature on religion in the war and post-war periods in the former Yugoslavia (Perica 2004, Sells 1996, Velikonja 2003). In this literature, the real world impact of the cross is considered primarily in terms of its function as an ethnic symbol, a sign of unity within one group and division, confrontation and provocation across faith communities. In Vukovar, in Mostar, in Stolac, the planting of prominent public crosses responds to more than conflict with other national groups, it also communicates a message regarding conflict over the secular State, and over conflicting attitudes towards religion and the public sphere within the 'insider' national community, itself divided by practices of communication and non-communication. Setting these relationships in a political context is sensitive, since there are multiple political contexts into which the act of cross planting may fit. This complexity similarly marks the blessing of a religious figure on the institutions of a state or a political party, or a religious official's blessing of troops before a military mission, though these can easily be read as straightforward indications of religious support for political and military conflict and extremism. An insider perspective may appear strikingly different. Firstly, because these blessings appear – without regard to the nature of ongoing conflicts – a part of normal religious life. Religious blessings over troops follow formulas, and in many communities a representative of a religious community is not morally or practically free to refuse to perform such a blessing. Outsiders reasonably link a blessing of troops to moral approval for their actions, while – a subject crying out for historical scholarship – a church's traditions may wholly disregard the moral consequences of blessing a soldier before they go out to kill or be killed. Of course, a priest's or a rabbi's or an imam's speech or behaviour can indicate a more than perfunctory support for soldiers in a conflict should they choose this, but understanding what is more than required by duty

can be extremely tricky. Secondly, for insiders, these actions are viewed in relation to a national community's internal divisions over the role of religion and secularity in political life. In that light, the vociferous exhortation of a religious figure at election time may appear to some a sign of established political strength and ideological conviction, to others a sign of real political weakness and insecurity. The challenge for interpreting these acts is normally heightened by the fact that few representatives of religious communities provide evidence of their intention, or make public their assessment of the significance of competing contexts for their actions.

In conclusion, this essay presents a distinction between a balanced reflection on all three of the dimensions of an act which has religious and political connotations, on the one hand, and, on the other, the kind of critical account which makes more sweeping and a priori assumptions about the radicalizing function of religion in conflict. If this is accepted, then it will be clear that an account of religion and war based solely on Constantine's legacy is not enough. The balanced scholar cannot simply infer a negative lesson, for instance, from the proximity of the Battle of Milvia and the Edict of Milan, in line with the critical account of those like Yoder who note that religion and political power when mixed lead to killing and to war. These critiques are not without persuasive force and analytical value, as long as this can be properly set in context. Yoder's conviction that it is possible to wholly separate religion and politics need not be accepted to see the value of his point that apolitical religious acts are themselves political. Clearly balance and sensitivity are not the only criteria at stake here. After so much blood has been shed with the blessing of religious figures and institutions, who cannot be sympathetic with the critical outsider voice, even as it assumes that insider perspectives do not vary significantly, or that such variety does not matter; that the relationships established through an armed conflict can become the primary point of reference for a discussion of the system of rights and responsibilities which must end that conflict.

But there is also a further ground on which the outsider can press a critical perspective on the naivety of the insider who interprets religious institutions without regard for their apparent political meanings. The insider cannot justly ignore the existence and the natural need for security of the religious and non-religious others alongside whom they live. There is in this perspective no religious act which is not a political act insofar as it creates or affects a relationship to the other. Understand where Yoder and other critiques of the deployment of religion in a conflict are coming from: for most, the conflict constitutes a crisis, within which there is no act which does not proceed from that crisis. In this crisis, there is no sense in which religious acts can be viewed as normal, unrelated to the politics of the conflict which imposes itself on all people and on all of their acts. Insofar as it speaks to a human level, this critical perspective has persuasive power. From this perspective, the act of religious exclusion is the beginning of war, not the first gunfire; and the act of religious inclusion is the



necessary conclusion to a political suit for peace. This was the lesson repeatedly drawn during the European wars of religion. In other words, in this view, religious relationships must be resolved at Milan if there has been a battle at Milvia. Nevertheless, empirically it may be observed that many people separate between a political crisis and the norms and normal meanings associated with religious acts. So, for instance, in Israel and Palestine: people who have decided that their community is in crisis will disagree about the significance of religious continuities, as they disagree about other social continuities. If we are to accept that conflict provides a sense of crisis alongside a sense of the normal, then the careful examination of multiple social or political relationships is a more persuasive framework for understanding a conflict and its consequences than is provided by the popular and academic works which assume that the role of religion in conflict must either be dangerous or wholly removed from the political realm. In this framework, the voice of the critic will not be silenced, but refined. Empirically, context and nuance will then make a difference to the relationship between religion and conflict, but the empirical process takes place within the challenging environment in which all aspects of life in modern armed conflicts can be seen to be subject to crisis, in which balance and nuance alone represent inadequate resources for the engaged observer.

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**VAŽNOST RELIGIJE I SEKULARNOSTI U POGLEDU RATA I MIRA**  
**Izazovi akademikima u svetlu Milanskog edikta**

**Apstrakt**

*Religija se danas posmatra kao jedan od najuobičajenijih i najsnažnijih motiva za oružane sukobe. Ovaj članak se odvaja od istaknutog dela postojeće akademske literature u smislu da sugeriše kako se znatan uticaj religije u sukobima ne može primarno posmatrati kao izolovana radikalistička ideološka sila koja deluje tako što definiše krajnosti date krize. Naprotiv, tvrdi se da religija ima znatan uticaj kroz praksu koja izražava norme institucija i zajednica koje su u sukobu. Iz tog razloga esej zaključuje da neke verske ustanove mogu da pokušaju da definišu težnje zajednice ka sukobu, dok druge ne uviđaju nužnu vezu između sukoba i upotrebe verskih oblika ili uloga koje na sebe preuzimaju verski činioци.*

**Ključne reči:** religija i rat, sekularna i verska reakcija na oružani sukob, hrišćanstvo i država, dokazi u studijama religije i nereligijskih aspekata.